

to our literature with a genius, with their words. And, of course, a few even entered politics. [*Laughter*]

The Irish talent for statesmanship has been evident on both sides of the Atlantic. And today we're proud to welcome a friend of peace and a friend of freedom, my good friend Bertie Ahern.

Mr. Prime Minister, I want to thank you for your tireless work in the struggle against terrorism on Saint Patrick's Island. I appreciate your leadership. I appreciate your strength of character. I appreciate your vision. It takes courage to work the path—to walk the path of peace. And your leadership, Mr. Prime Minister, is appreciated not only in your nation but in ours as well. As you work for peace, our Government and the American people will stand with you.

Today, America and Ireland are united in many ways. The economies of our two countries are closely tied. We're working together to bring freedom and justice to Afghanistan and the Balkans and other countries that have not known it. We share a common commitment to the values preached by Saint Patrick: Liberty under God and the dignity of all human persons.

Taoiseach, we pay tribute to the role the Irish have played in defending and renewing the ideals that Americans cherish. May our friendship remain steadfast, and may the citizens of both our nations enjoy a happy and blessed Saint Patrick's Day. Welcome back.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:25 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Prime Minister Ahern.

Statement on House of Representatives Passage of Fiscal Year 2006 Budget Legislation

March 17, 2005

I applaud the House for passing a budget that protects America, promotes economic growth, supports our priorities, and keeps us on track to cut the deficit in half by 2009. It closely follows my budget proposal and reflects our shared commitment to be wise with

the people's money and restrain spending in Washington, DC.

Statement on the Terri Schiavo Case

March 17, 2005

The case of Terri Schiavo raises complex issues. Yet in instances like this one, where there are serious questions and substantial doubts, our society, our laws, and our courts should have a presumption in favor of life. Those who live at the mercy of others deserve our special care and concern. It should be our goal as a nation to build a culture of life, where all Americans are valued, welcomed, and protected—and that culture of life must extend to individuals with disabilities.

Remarks in a Discussion on Strengthening Social Security in Pensacola, Florida

March 18, 2005

The President. Thank you, Governor. Please be seated. Thanks for coming. I am glad to be back under better circumstances. It was my honor to come and represent our Government during what was a terrible tragedy, and that was Hurricane Ivan. I want to thank the mayors of the communities here. I want to thank the base commanders. I want to thank people responsible for helping people get their lives back in order.

I still saw a lot of blue roofs flying in. So I know there's still a lot of work to do. But I—it was such an honor to work with Jeb and Congressman Miller and members of the delegation and the mayors to try to do our duty to get resources to people who need help. And so I want to congratulate the stalwart citizens of this part of the world. I was struck by the devastation. I was pleased by the sense of spirit when we came down here, a spirit that has been manifested in what is obviously an ongoing recovery. But we're still paying attention to you. And again, I want to thank you for your courage.

Before I talk about a big issue, I've got some other things to say. They used to say, "Well, you know, he's got his daddy's eyes

but his mother's mouth,"—[laughter]—which means I'm about to talk a lot. No—[laughter]—I do want to thank our panelists, including my mother. What a great honor that Mom is here. We're going on from here to Orlando. I'm going on to Crawford, and Mom is headed over to work with Jeb on raising money for literacy. And it's—I'm sorry Laura is not with me.

Audience members. Aw-w-w!

The President. Yes, I know. I used to oftentimes—all the time—say she was the country's greatest First Lady. Wait a minute. At least make it a tie. [Laughter] I love her dearly. She's a fabulous mom, great wife, and she really is a spectacular First Lady. She sends her best and love to Mom and to the great Governor of the great State of Florida, Jeb, and to you all. She's—I'm sorry she couldn't be here.

Speaking about brothers and great Governors, he's doing a fabulous job for Florida. He's straightforward. He's plainspoken. He does what he says he's going to do. And I think that's important, and it's a good lesson for people who are paying attention to public servants, people who are wondering whether or not it makes sense to run for office. He came into office with his integrity, and he's going to leave with his integrity.

I appreciate Gerald McKenzie and David Sam from Pensacola Junior College. We call them community colleges in Florida and Texas. I can't tell you how important the community college system is to make sure that workers, both old and young, gain the skills necessary to fill the jobs of the 21st century. I am a big supporter of community colleges, as is Jeb, because we understand the community college system is available, it is affordable, and it is flexible. If there needs to be a curriculum change to help people, help employers find workers, help hospitals find nurses, community colleges are able to do so.

I want to thank the Members of Congress for making sure that my community college initiative is funded, not for only the sake of community colleges but, more importantly, for the sake of people who need a skill set to fill the jobs of the 21st century. So I want to thank the Pensacola Junior College folks for being so generous in the hospitality.

I'm traveling with some pretty good company. Besides Mother and Jeb, Senator Mel Martinez is with us today. Senator, thank you. I mentioned him once; I get to mention him twice, since this is his district—Congressman Jeff Miller, doing a fine job. Thanks for being here. And then we've got some folks down from the central part of the State, starting with Congressman Tom Feeney. Congressman, I'm proud you're coming. Thanks for being here. Congressman Adam Putnam—last time I was with Adam was in the middle of an orange grove after one of the other hurricanes hit. As you can see, that orange grove did something to the color of his hair. [Laughter]

And finally, we're here with Congressman Ric Keller. Appreciate you coming, Congressman. You don't know this, but you're about to find out that he is marrying Dee Dee Michel tomorrow. Congratulations, and good luck on the wedding. I'm a little surprised you're here with us. [Laughter] But we won't tell Dee Dee. We'll tell her you're planning for the wedding.

I want to thank—oh, Congressman Dave Weldon is with us. Dave thanks for coming, a great man, Dr. Dave Weldon. Appreciate you coming, Dave.

I am proud to be here with the Pensacola mayor, John Fogg. Mr. Mayor, thank you, sir; all the State and local officials—I'm working my way through a list here.

There's one other fellow I wanted to introduce you to. His name is Bob Woodard. Bob, stand up for a minute, please. You don't know, Bob—some of you don't—but he was at the base of Air Force One when I landed, because every time I come to a community, I like to herald a soldier in the army of compassion, a volunteer, somebody who has taken time out of his or her life to make somebody else's life better. He is doing something which I think is an important contribution to the future of our country. He is a mentor. He is one of those souls who says—puts his arm around somebody who hurts, somebody who needs love, somebody who needs comfort and says, "I love you," and "What can I do to help you?" I want to thank you for your contribution to the country.

I want to remind you, if you want to serve America, feed the hungry, find shelter for the homeless, find somebody whose heart is broken and help heal it with the love that God has given you. Thank you for what you do.

Before we get to Social Security, I want to say a couple of other points. I want to thank the members of the United States military and those who support the military for not only making this country more secure in the short term but helping make this country secure for generations to come. You see, the more free the world becomes, the more peaceful the world becomes for our children and our grandchildren. And we took some tough decisions in order to protect this country. And by doing so, we have laid the foundation for freedom.

You know, I hope it heartens those who have served and the families of those who have served to have seen the millions of people vote in Afghanistan. Think about what has happened—think about what’s happened in that society in a brief period of time. Young girls couldn’t go to school under the Taliban because these people were so backward and so barbaric that their view of the—vision of the world was dim and dark. We acted in our own self-interest, admittedly. We said, “If you harbor a terrorist, you’re equally as guilty as the terrorist.” When the President says something, he better mean it. I meant it. Our military responded. The Taliban is out, but as importantly, the people of Afghanistan are free.

I just talked to Condoleezza Rice on the phone. She just came back from a—she was in Afghanistan, I think, yesterday. She said, “You’re not going to believe it, Mr. President. You’re not going to believe how hopeful this free society is. You’re not going to believe the optimism that these people have, all because they’re free.” A free Afghanistan is in the interest of the United States of America.

A free Lebanon is in the interest of the United States of America. It’s a good sign when millions feel comfortable going to the street without Government reprisal to express their opinion. In order for there to be a free Lebanon, Syria must remove all the troops and all the intelligence services in

order to let these people vote in free society—in freedom, without fear.

I believe there will be a Palestinian state based upon democratic institutions, and I know it’s in Israel’s interest and in the Palestinians’ interest for there to be two states, two democracies, living side by side in peace.

And then, of course, one of the most amazing events—at least as far as I was concerned, from my perspective—is when over 8 million Iraqis, in complete defiance of people who were trying to prevent them from going to the polls by creating incredible fear—they said, “You’re not going to stop us. We long to be free.” And they went to the polls sending a clear signal, not only the terrorists in Iraq but to freedom-lovers around the world, that freedom is a powerful force, and when unleashed, it will continue its march.

Over the next 4 years, this administration will work to free people—will work with our friends and allies to promote freedom, because I understand free societies will be peaceful societies, and the more free the world is, the more peaceful the world will become. And people will look back at this moment of history and say, this generation, those of us given the honor of service will have done our duty to spread freedom and peace around the world. Freedom is on the march, and I want to thank the military folks and their families for helping make it happen.

Our economy is recovering; it’s doing well. I’m proud of the fact that the great State of Florida has got a 4.3 percent unemployment rate. It says something about your Governor. No, he’s right—he just waved me off, kind of like trying to hit a carrier. *[Laughter]* He’s right. Not because of him, not because of me, because of the entrepreneurs of Florida, people who are willing to take risk, be wise about spending capital, and employing people.

No, the economy is fine. There are some dark clouds on the horizon that we’ve got to address. We got too many lawsuits. I want to thank Congress for getting a class-action bill to my suit—my desk. We need to get medical liability reform done in the United States Congress in order to keep good doctors practicing medicine.

There's a lot of things we can do and will do. I'm looking forward to getting a final budget to my desk that's wise about how we spend your money, that's also wise about making sure you got money in your pocket. And you're going to need it because, unfortunately, energy prices are going up. And I know you're concerned about it, and I'm concerned about it too. I was concerned about it in 2001, when we put together a strategy, an energy strategy, part of which required action by the United States Congress that would encourage conservation, encourage the use of renewable sources of energy like ethanol and biodiesel, that encouraged research and development to figure out better ways to use energy in the long run—because one of these days, we're going to have to change the nature of the automobile by driving hydrogen-powered automobiles, to become less dependent on sources of energy. In other words, there's a lot of things we need to be doing now.

I know we need to be building LNG, liquified natural gas, terminals. We need to do more on nuclear power. Congress needs to get an energy bill. We've been debating whether or not there ought to be an energy bill to my desk now for 4 years. And that's too much talk, given the fact that consumers are beginning to hurt, too much talk given the fact that the—we're too dependent on foreign sources of energy. I'm concerned about the energy, and Congress needs to be concerned. These Members are concerned. I talked to them on Air Force One about it. I can be a plainspoken fellow if I need to be. *[Laughter]* And they're good listeners. They're ready to go. But Congress needs to get a bill to my desk so we can start becoming less dependent on foreign sources of energy.

Let me talk about Social Security. Jeb is right. We don't need to talk about it. Some people say, "You shouldn't have talked about it." I think the job of a President is to confront problems and not pass them on to future Presidents. And I'm pleased to report Members from the United States Congress that are traveling with me agree that Congress needs to confront problems and not pass them on to future Congresses.

And we got a problem in Social Security. Let me first tell you, Franklin Roosevelt did

a good thing by setting up a safety net for seniors. And I applaud him for that. And a lot of seniors who are now getting their checks understand why I'm applauding him, because the Social Security check you receive is really important for you. And—but things have changed since Franklin Roosevelt was the President.

Before I tell you what's changed, I'm going to say this once—I may say it 5 times before this is over: If you're getting a check, nothing is going to change. I don't care what the propaganda says. I don't care about the political rhetoric. You're going to get your check. For those of you born prior to 1950, you're going to get your check. The Government—nothing will change in the system. We're here to talk about not you—we're here to talk about your children and your grandchildren. That's who we're here to talk about.

And I'll tell you why we've got a problem. First of all, Social Security is a pay-as-you-go system; money comes in, and it goes out. Now, some of you might think that Social Security is a trust. In other words, the Government takes your Government and holds it for you, and then when it comes time to retire, you get your money back. That's not the way it works. The Government takes your payroll taxes and pays out to the people who have now retired, and if they got any money left over, it goes to pay other parts of Government. And all that's left is an IOU from one part of Government to the next. In other words, it's pay-as-you-go.

And that system works well when you got a bunch of workers paying in for a few beneficiaries. That's the way it was when Franklin Roosevelt designed the system. In 1950, there were 16 workers paying into the system for every beneficiary. So obviously, the load per worker is pretty light. What's changed is there is a bulge of people fixing to retire called the baby boomers. Both of us are—

Gov. Jeb Bush. Both of us, yes, sir.

The President. Yes. *[Laughter]* We are baby boomers. I happen to be turning eligible at—obviously, at age 62 in 2008. It's quite convenient. *[Laughter]* Did you plan it that way? Well, thank you. And there's a lot of us. There is a bulge in the population. And not only there's a lot of us, we're living longer than during the time when Social Security

was first fixed. And we're living longer than the generation preceding us. So you got a lot of people getting ready to retire who will be living longer, and not only that, we've been promised more benefits than the previous generation. People have run for office saying, "Vote for me; I'm going to make sure the benefits increase." And so you've got a lot of people living longer, getting greater benefits, and yet, we're not having as many children in this society. In other words, you got fewer people paying into the system. The math doesn't work.

It works for those who've retired. Second time I've said it—if you're getting your check, you have nothing to worry about it. It doesn't work for people who are going to have to pay for the baby boomers like me who will be living longer, getting more money. And so the fundamental question is: If you see that problem, what are you going to do about it? And so the first thing I want to tell you is, we have got a problem.

And the extent of the problem can be seen on this chart. In 2018, there's more money going out than coming in. Right now, because the baby boomers haven't started retiring—who will be living longer, receiving more money—there's more money coming in than going out, which is being spent. Pretty soon, there's going to be more money coming out than going in. In the year 2027, there will be \$200 billion beyond the payroll taxes necessary to pay for the promises the Government has made. It increases every year, see. In 2018, it starts going negative—increases, increases, increases—to give you an extent by how much—by 2027, it's 200 billion, greater than 200 billion the next year, greater than the next—you know.

And so it starts to accumulate, which says to me that we have a problem that we need to address now. Because if you wait later, a younger worker is either going to have pay massive payroll taxes in order to make sure the Government pays the benefits; they're going to have to cut my benefits; they're going to have to—borrow a ton of money. In other words, now is the time to act. We do—have no problem for those of you who are receiving your check. We have a problem for your children and your grandchildren.

And the problem is right there in the cash deficits in a pay-as-you-go system.

And so I've taken it on. I think this is my 16th State. I'm traveling all around the country, which I like to do—it's a convenient excuse to get out of the Nation's Capital—[laughter]—and I'm explaining to people: You're going to get your check, and we've got a problem.

And I think there's some logic to the strategy, because, listen to this: If you're a Member of Congress, and all of a sudden the constituents start to say, "We've got a problem, Mr. Congressman or Madam Congressman." The next thing they're going to say is, "What you going to do about it?" And once we can convince the seniors they have nothing to worry about, which they don't, the fundamental question for them becomes—from a lot of younger Americans, "I'm glad you're taking care of my grandparents or my dad or my mom, but what are you going to do for me?" And that's the dynamic that's going to get people coming to the table.

In order to help them come to the table, in my State of the Union Address, I said, "I really want people to bring ideas forward. Please bring your ideas forward. There will be no political retribution if you bring good ideas forward," because I understand this is going to require Republicans and Democrats coming to the table—precisely what the American people want, by the way. They want people to fix it, not to play politics with it.

So all options are on the table. The other day, I was with a former Democrat Congressman named Tim Penny—Tim Penny, who had some interesting ideas. My predecessor, President Clinton, recognized we had a problem; he put some ideas on the table. And so I'm looking forward to people from both parties coming up and saying, "Mr. President, here are some of my ideas." And my answer will be, "Welcome. Thanks for bringing them forward. Let's just see if we can't work together to get something done."

I've got some ideas, and I want to share one of them with you, which I think—I hope you find interesting. And first of all, by the way, as Congress brings ideas, I'm not interested in a temporary fix, and neither should you be. I want you to remember 1983. There

was a—President Ronald Reagan and Leader Dole and Speaker Tip O’Neill realized we had a problem, got Republicans and Democrats together, and came together and said, “We’ll put together a temporary fix.” This is the so-called 75-year option. And I like the spirit of people coming together. I like the idea of people saying, “We’ve got a problem. Why don’t we fix it in a bipartisan way?” The only problem is, the 75-year option wasn’t exactly right, because today is a lot less than 75 years from 1983. And so when you hear the—“Don’t worry. We’ll just fix it for 75 years,” the way the demographics are, the math just won’t let that happen. So now is the time to have a permanent solution.

And as they do the permanent solution, we also have got to work, in my judgment, to make sure individual workers get a better deal from Social Security. And the better deal would be allow—in my judgment, again—to allow younger workers to take part of their own money. See, when you hear “payroll taxes,” that kind of sounds like it’s the Government’s money. It’s not; it’s your money. And I want you to know I understand that—that you ought to take some of your own money and be able to save it in bonds and stocks.

And the reason why I think you ought to be able to do that is because a mix of conservative bonds and stocks will get you a better rate of return on your money than that which you’re going to get inside the Government. And that’s important, because if you’re a young worker, interest compounds—or if you’re an old worker—interest compounds. But the longer you hold money, compounding, the more you’ll end up with. It grows. And the greater rate of return you get on your money, the more you’ll have when it comes time to retire.

So the idea is, as a part of a Social Security system, allow you to take some of your money so you can build a nest egg of your own. I like the idea of people building nest eggs. I think if you own something, you’re likely to have a more vital stake in the future of the country. One of the most heartening statistics, I think, in today’s world is more and more people are owning their own home. More minority families own a home today than ever before. That’s heartening, I think.

I tell people, I love the idea of somebody opening up the door to their house and say, “Welcome to my home. Thank you for coming to my piece of property.”

I think the fact that more and more people are owning their own small business is helpful. I know it’s going to be helpful to have more people owning a piece of their own retirement account and managing it.

Now, a couple of things about personal accounts. One, I’ve told you about the compounding rate of return. Just to give you an example: If a person were allowed to take 4 percent of their payroll taxes, or a third of the payroll taxes, and set it aside in a personal account, starting at age 21, and that person earned \$35,000 over her—his or her lifetime, that by the time she can retire, that money set aside would be worth \$250,000, as a nest egg. In other words, that’s compounding rate of interest will do that. Obviously, if you make 70,000 over your lifetime, it’s double that. Then you have a half-a-million dollars that you can call your own.

So what can you do with that? Well, first, I know some people get nervous about investments. We’re going to talk about investments here. You can’t take your money and put it in the lottery, let me put it to you that way. In other words, a personal account doesn’t give you latitude to—you know, you still got jai alai here? Yes. Okay, you can’t go to a jai alai deal. [Laughter] You’ve got to invest it in a conservative mix of bonds and stocks, just like Federal employees do now.

Any Federal employees understand what I’m talking about, the Thrift Savings Plan? It works. We’re going to talk to somebody who’s got a piece of the Thrift Savings Plan. This is happening. This isn’t—I didn’t sit here and invent this. This is taking place already at the Federal level. People who work for the Federal Government get to take some of their own money and set it aside in a conservative mix of bonds and stocks because the Government realizes you get a better rate of return on your money. If it’s good enough for Federal employees, it seems like to me it ought to be good enough for people who are working, you know, who aren’t working for the Federal Government. [Laughter] That was not a cheap shot at people like me

working at the Federal Government. [Laughter]

Secondly, you'll get the check from the Federal Government in the Social Security system if you're a younger worker. I just can't guarantee how big it's going to be. You know, there's not enough money to pay the promises, I'll just tell you that. I think that's part of the dialog is to make sure everybody understands. It's not a trust, and we're not going to be able to keep the promises unless we're willing to have extraordinarily high taxes on the people coming up, or significant benefit cuts.

And so one way to help you do a better job of coming closer to what the Government has promised is to allow you to earn this money and then use it as a part of a retirement plan. In other words, the Government is going to get you a check, and then you're also going to be able to take money out of your own personal account to help you when you retire. That's important for you to know.

The system is not fair for people, oftentimes. Somebody dies early, been working 30 years, dies at 55 years old; money goes in the system. The spouse doesn't get a dime until he or she turns 62. That doesn't seem fair to me. Does it to you? In a personal account, if you had one of those and your assets were growing and you passed away, you could leave it to whomever you want. There would be some comfort for the spouse. Two people working, a husband and a spouse; husband predeceases the spouse; she continues to work. She's either going to get, at 62 years old, her own Social Security check or survivor benefits, which is ever larger, but not both. That doesn't seem fair, does it? Somebody is working all their life; the money they put inside Social Security is not available for somebody he or she loves. If you have your personal account, it grows. You die, your wife or your husband is going to get your personal account—or your children.

I like the idea of encouraging savings. For those of you who studied macroeconomics—it's a fancy word for how to make sure the economy grows—the more you save, the more capital there is; the more capital there is, the more money is available for small business expansion, so people can work.

So we need to encourage savings. I like the idea. I'm telling you, I like the idea. I'm going to talk a lot about it. I'm going to talk to others about the idea too. It needs to be a part of the dialog. And it's interesting, you know, we're not talking about a big cultural shift here. When I was coming up, I don't remember my mother telling me to be careful about my 401(k) plan. They didn't exist, I don't think. There wasn't a lot of focus on encouraging people to manage their own money. Today, that has changed. There's a lot of young Americans, Americans from all walks of life, Americans from all income levels, Americans from all neighborhoods who understand what it means to have a 401(k), an IRA, a defined contribution plan. And they like it, and they're used to it, and they're comfortable with it.

And so I want Congress to consider making this same kind of culture available for workers through the Social Security system, to strengthen the system, to say to younger workers, "It's a better deal for you," to be able to assure grandparents that when it comes to their grandchildren, the safety net that was available for them will be available for the new generation coming up.

And so now I'm going to talk with some other people about it, starting with my mother. I promised not to tell you her age, but she's eligible for Social Security. [Laughter]

Barbara Bush. How old are you? [Laughter]

The President. Fifty-eight. How about that?

Mrs. Bush. Add 22 years. [Laughter]

The President. Yes.

Mrs. Bush. You're supposed to ask me why I'm here.

The President. Okay. First of all, I now know why I'm getting white hair. [Laughter]

Mrs. Bush. I'm here because when else can I see my two oldest boys? [Laughter]

The President. How about a little better answer than that, will you?

Mrs. Bush. That's reason number one.

The President. Now, wait, it's not, how can I see my two better boys, it's how can I tell my two better boys in person what to do, is what you're really trying to say. [Laughter]

Mrs. Bush. Right, right. If you would listen, I'd tell you more. [Laughter] But that's really not why I'm here. I'm here because your father and I have 17 grandchildren, all born after—we're doing our part, incidentally, on the labor—[laughter]—but all born after 1950. And we want to know, is someone going to do something about it. That's the whole reason—other than seeing my boys.

The President. Well, I'm glad you're here, Mom. And yes, I hope you can tell—I think you will be able to tell—and I think others like Mom, who are worried about whether or not Government even cares about taking on a tough enough issue to address the issue for grandchildren, whether or not there's a will. You'll see. I think you'll see by the time this is over that there is an interest and a desire, a willingness to take on a tough issue, just like you taught me, not to shirk my duty but to step up and lead and to do—do the hard work.

And it is. Listen, I concede, Mom, that Members of Congress, some would rather not be talking about it. But we're going to talk about it, and I'm going to assure you—I've got your stubbornness—that I'm going to—in a good way—I'm going to keep talking about it until something gets done. I'm going to keep traveling the country saying to people, "We've got a problem. If you're a senior, you're going to get your check," and I'm willing to work with Congress. And I'm going to tell you, I—the people of this country are tired of partisan bickering on big issues. They don't want people—they just want the problem solved.

We've got Lee Abdnor with us. She is—she's from Boulder, Colorado. Is that true still?

Leanne Abdnor. Yes, sir.

The President. Listen, I want you to know, I formed a committee in 2001 of Republicans and Democrats to look at Social Security. And Patrick Moynihan, a former Senator from New York, headed it. Isn't that right?

Ms. Abdnor. That's right.

The President. And Lee's on it. Okay, let her go. She studied this.

[At this point, Ms. Abdnor, president, For Our Grandchildren, Boulder, CO, made brief remarks.]

The President. Thanks for coming, Lee. Thanks for serving. It was——

Ms. Abdnor. My pleasure.

The President. Let me ask you. I think it's important for you to understand that those who served on the committee were good thinkers, all walks of life, and represented both political parties, and they came together with some ideas. I think there was a couple of ideas that I think are very interesting. We've sent them up to Congress, of course. One of the interesting points that came out of there—and it's very important for people to understand—is that you can design a system to make sure that low-income Americans—that the system is progressive, which is a good idea. Pozen is the man that you served with, I think.

Ms. Abdnor. Yes, he was one of the ones.

The President. He floated a really interesting idea that I hope Congress takes a look at, which is to make sure that the lower-income Americans are treated in a way so that—that when people retire they're as taken care of as well as can be, that the safety net is truly a safety net. It makes sense. And so you can structure a system so that we're—make sure that we're taking care of the low-income people better.

And my only point is Lee's committee had a lot of really good ideas out there. I like the spirit of how they met. They didn't show up and say, "I'm not going to listen to your idea." They showed up and said, "Bring your ideas forward." And as I said, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who was a fine, fine United States Senator from New York, a Democrat, was able to coax good ideas out. So thanks for the spirit.

Ms. Abdnor. Exactly, and Mr. President, I think one of the things that was most gratifying was that even in private, we never talked about politics, not once in all of those months. All we talked about was policy, what's the best way to go forward, how would certain people be helped, how would certain people be harmed by different ideas or by doing nothing.

The President. Well, I appreciate you.

Andrew Brown is with us.

Andrew Brown. Yes, sir.

The President. Where you from, Andrew?

Mr. Brown. I'm from Bay, Arkansas. It's a small town, about 2,000 people, in north-east Arkansas.

The President. That's 3 times more than Crawford. [Laughter]

Mr. Brown. Yes, sir.

The President. Good. Did you—are you educated?

Mr. Brown. Well, I graduated from the Naval Academy last year, sir. [Applause]

The President. Awesome, yes. [Applause] Figured that would get a nice round of applause here in Pensacola.

Mr. Brown. Yes, sir, and I came down here last summer to begin flight school at Pensacola.

The President. Good, yes. How is it going?

Mr. Brown. It's going really well.

The President. No crashes?

Mr. Brown. No crashes, yet. [Laughter]

The President. That's good. It sounds positive. [Laughter]

Mr. Brown. Yes, sir. And I'm just really enjoying that and looking forward to getting my wings in a couple of months and getting out and doing it for real.

The President. Congratulations. Thanks for serving. Other than making sure the Commander in Chief knows you're about to get your wings, why are you here? [Laughter]

Mr. Brown. Yes, sir. Social Security kind of concerns me a little bit. I don't really foresee that it will be around for my generation.

The President. Let me stop you. This is not the first time I have heard this, "I don't think it's going to be around for my generation." Congress needs to hear this. Go ahead.

Mr. Brown. So I invest my money mostly in a Roth IRA. I think that's a great way to invest money. And I applaud Congress for upping the limits there, letting people do more with their money. And I also invest in the Thrift Savings Plan.

The President. Explain to people what that means, invest in a Thrift Savings Plan. I think some out there listening may not be sure what the Thrift Savings Plan is. It sounds sophisticated. It sounds unmanageable.

[Mr. Brown made further remarks.]

The President. Who decides where the money goes?

Mr. Brown. I decide where the money goes. The percentile breakdown, I decide.

The President. The people who are running the Thrift Savings say, "Here's five different options for you," kind of a different mix and risk and return, I guess.

Mr. Brown. Yes, sir, ranging from international——

The President. Which one of them is not the lottery, I want you to know. [Laughter]

Mr. Brown. Yes, sir. And so I've enjoyed being able to put more money aside and grow tax-free through the Thrift Savings program that wouldn't be covered under the Roth.

The President. And how often do you get a statement?

Mr. Brown. I check all mine online, sir.

The President. Oh, you do? [Laughter] Don't worry about making the Commander in Chief look technologically incompetent. [Laughter] Private. Anyway—[laughter].

Think about this. I just want you to listen to what he said, he checks about it online. He watches his money grow. Some people get monthly statements. They watch their money. There's nothing better in a society than to have people concerned about their assets. That's what ownership does. It's yours. Nobody can take it away.

The other thing is, is that when you hold money over a long period of time, there is a predictable rate of return depending upon the risks you take. And there's ways to design programs so that the closer you get to retirement, if the markets were to happen to go down, you're able to get your money, see? That's what's important for people to understand. And obviously, you feel comfortable doing it.

Mr. Brown. Yes, sir, I'm very pleased with the Thrift Savings Plan.

The President. Good. See, he's a Navy pilot, risktaker, and manages his own money. [Laughter] Thanks for coming, Andrew. I appreciate your concern.

Mr. Brown. Thank you, sir. It's an honor.

The President. Thanks for serving. By the way, somebody one time told me they saw a survey that said people like Andrew, people Andrew's age think it's a lot more likely they'll see a UFO than to get a Social Security check. [Laughter] May be right.

With us is Dr. Ron Guy, age 58 years old.

Dr. Ron Guy. Yes, sir, same age.

The President. Welcome.

Dr. Guy. Thank you, sir.

The President. Leading edge of the baby boomers.

Dr. Guy. Yes, sir.

The President. What do you do?

Dr. Guy. Presently, sir, I do financial strategies, working with a great group of partners at Guernsey and Associates. There are 15 of us that help people plan their life, from wherever they are to age 100. And we look very closely, sir, at Social Security.

The President. What happens if they're 101? You can help them on that too.

Dr. Guy. Okay, we can do that, too, sir.

The President. Okay, good. So give me—this is his field, right? You understand pay-as-you-go; you understand all the terms we're using; you understand Thrift Savings Plans, internal rate of returns—let her go.

[Dr. Guy made further remarks.]

The President. Thank you, sir. Appreciate you. Let me—one of the interesting things about investing—when you think of investors, you think of a certain kind of person, and I don't view that—I'm sure you don't either. You work with people from all walks of life. I mean, everybody has got a chance to be an—should have a chance to be an investor. Investing is not limited to a certain class of person. That doesn't make any sense. And yet, I think that's the attitude of some, you know, "We can't let certain people, maybe, invest their own money. Maybe they don't know how to do it."

I'm kind of leading you on here, but give me a sense for how hard it is for people to figure out how to invest their money in a prescribed set of bonds and stocks.

[Dr. Guy made further remarks.]

The President. Well, good. See, financial literacy. By the way, one of the interesting things we've done is we've encouraged the faith-based community to take on the idea of educating people in financial literacy, so that we can make sure financial literacy is able to permeate all neighborhoods in our society. People will be comfortable with this. This is something that is happening, by the way, already without Government, of course.

Defined contribution plans exist throughout all society right now, Thrift Savings accounts, IRAs, 401(k)s.

The reason I keep emphasizing that is when I talk about a savings plan for individuals, it's happening. And the question is, do we have the wisdom to extend this kind of savings plan to the Social Security system to allow younger workers—this isn't going to—you don't have to worry about me and—we just don't have to worry about it. The system is fixed if you're born before 1950. It's not going to change one iota. The question is, do we listen to younger workers? Do we fit the plan in to meet the current culture, and do we give them a better deal? Do we try to make the system on an individual basis?

I told the—[inaudible]—that these accounts do not permanently fix Social Security. We're going to have to do other things. They are part of a Social Security fix that will help the individual worker.

Now, I'm going to talk to Myrtle Campbell. Myrtle, put that mic up there.

Myrtle Campbell. Yes, Mr. President.

The President. Thanks for coming. I came all the way to wish you a happy birthday for your birthday next Sunday—isn't that right?

Mrs. Campbell. Yes. Thank you, Mr. President.

The President. Myrtle Campbell is here, and she brought somebody with her. Who did you bring with you?

Mrs. Campbell. I brought my granddaughter, Mary Beth Roberts.

The President. Very good. We'll start with you, if that's all right.

Mrs. Campbell. With me?

The President. Yes. Do you receive a Social Security check?

Mrs. Campbell. Yes. And for 82 years, that amounts to a lot of checks, you know. And it has come in real handy, and I would hate to part with it. [Laughter]

The President. Yes, you count on it.

Mrs. Campbell. Yes.

The President. I want you to know, Myrtle, I understand a lot of people count on their Social Security check. I mean, it's a really important part of a lot of people's lives. Some people count only on their Social Security check, and therefore, one of the issues in talking about this is to make sure we don't

frighten you. Seriously—we don't want people to feel like the Government is fixing to make sure that the check she counts on is diminished or goes away. And I understand. I fully understand that. And that's why I'm spending a lot of time talking about it, because I understand that sometimes there's another message getting out there.

I can remember in 2000, they said, "If old George W. gets elected, he's going to take away your check." I got elected, so in the 2004 campaign it didn't quite work because people did get their checks.

Keep going. Are you worried about it?

Mrs. Campbell. I'm not worried about it, no. I am concerned, however, for my grandchildren and what's coming up for them and how their livelihood will be, what's due for them.

The President. How many have you got, how many grandchildren?

Mrs. Campbell. I have nine grandchildren, and I have a whole slew of students throughout the United States that I'm concerned about as well.

The President. You're a teacher?

Mrs. Campbell. I'm a Bible teacher.

The President. Great, thanks.

Mrs. Campbell. I'm a volunteer.

The President. Volunteer, very good. That's fantastic.

Mrs. Campbell. I was concerned with children, like your mother. [Laughter]

The President. Yes.

[Mrs. Campbell made further remarks.]

The President. Well, I appreciate you. Thank you for sharing that with us, Myrtle. And I want you to introduce your granddaughter to us.

Mrs. Campbell. Well, this is Mary Beth Roberts. She's the daughter—one of the daughters of my daughter.

The President. One of the daughters of your daughter.

Mrs. Campbell. Wanda Roberts.

The President. That's good. Three daughters?

Mrs. Campbell. Three.

Mary Beth Roberts. They're over there.

Mrs. Campbell. She has five.

The President. You got all the sisters here?

Ms. Roberts. Yes.

The President. Fantastic. Oh yes, I see them over there.

Ms. Roberts. My little brother right there, too.

The President. Brother? Fine-looking lad. [Laughter] Boyfriend?

Ms. Roberts. Right next to him.

The President. Yes, got it. [Laughter] I picked him out. Didn't mean to embarrass you.

Ms. Roberts. It's okay.

The President. Although, Mary Beth, before we came on, said, "Make sure you introduce my boyfriend." [Laughter] Just kidding.

Ms. Roberts. That's all right.

The President. So what do you do?

Ms. Roberts. I am currently a college student at the University of West Florida, majoring in public relations.

The President. Fantastic. Good. Good. How's it going?

Ms. Roberts. I'm sorry?

The President. How's it going?

Ms. Roberts. It's going wonderful. I'm having a great time.

The President. Actually, you took some classes here, right?

Ms. Roberts. I did. I attended Pensacola Junior College and got my general education here.

The President. Good. Good job.

Ms. Roberts. Love it, too.

The President. Major?

Ms. Roberts. Public relations and advertising.

The President. Here's your chance. [Laughter]

Ms. Roberts. Appreciate that.

The President. Yes, no problem. [Laughter] So your grandmother says she's worried about her grandchildren—a safety net for her grandchildren when they retire. Do you share that same concern?

Ms. Roberts. I am extremely concerned. I'm pretty young. I'm 21, and I have a feeling that——

The President. Pretty young? [Laughter]

Ms. Roberts. I'm a baby.

The President. You're really young. Younger and younger every year. [Laughter] Go ahead.

Ms. Roberts. So by the time that I am a senior citizen, I'm sure Social Security will have been long gone, so I'm very concerned.

The President. Yes, it's important for 21-year-old people to pay attention to this issue. If it doesn't get fixed, the bill is going to be huge. That's what you've got to understand if you're 21 years old. You know, they always say, 21-year-olds don't pay attention to politics or issues. I don't know if that's the case.

Ms. Roberts. I pay attention, Mr. President.

The President. That's good. [Laughter] Give me a chance—and by the way, personal accounts are voluntary. In other words, I'm not going to say—the Government isn't going to say, “You have to do this.” I believe in saying to somebody, “If you choose to do this, you can do it. You don't have to do it.” If given that opportunity—I'm maybe a little premature, but if things go right, you may be given that opportunity pretty quickly.

Ms. Roberts. I hope so.

The President. So what would you—do you have any sense for whether or not you would opt to decide to take some of your money aside and put it aside in an account?

Ms. Roberts. I would definitely take that option.

The President. Really? It doesn't frighten you?

Ms. Roberts. Not at all. It actually would be encouraging to know that I will definitely get that when I do retire so I have something to count on.

The President. Yes. A nest egg.

Ms. Roberts. That's right.

The President. The other thing I think is important is to be able to pass—for Mary Beth to be able to pass her money on to whomever she chooses. I think that would be beneficial for society to have more assets accumulate and to be able to have kind of a generational transfer of assets. I think it would be beneficial for people from all walks of life. I really do. I think it's a concept that's an important concept, the idea of passing property on to whomever you choose, the idea of accumulating property.

If she starts, by the way, she's going to do quite well. It sounds like she's going to make quite a good living and set aside money

and put it away, conservative bonds and stocks. And it grows. It compounds.

I want to repeat another point. The money she'll get in her account, the return—rate of return on a conservative mix of bonds and stocks will be greater than her money will be earning in the Federal Government. And that's an important difference, particularly for a 21-year-old investor, over a period of 41 years. That money grows.

And so I'm glad you're interested.

Ms. Roberts. Yes, sir.

The President. My—then my advice to you, everybody else, people watching, is write your Senators and write your Congresspeople. Let them know you're concerned. Let them know you're interested in people coming together to solve this problem to save Social Security for generations to come.

Thanks for coming. Thanks for your interest. God bless.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:01 a.m. at Pensacola Junior College. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Jeb Bush of Florida; Gerald McKenzie, member, board of trustees, and David Sam, vice president of academic affairs, Pensacola Junior College; Mayor John R. Fogg of Pensacola, FL; former Representative Timothy J. Penny, senior fellow and co-director, Hubert H. Humphrey Institute Policy Forum; former Senator Bob Dole; and Robert C. Pozen, chairman, MFS Investment Management. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of this discussion.

Remarks on Strengthening Social Security in Orlando, Florida

March 18, 2005

The President. Thank you all for coming. Thanks for coming. Please be seated. Thanks for being here. Go ahead and be seated. Now. [Laughter] Thanks for the warm welcome. It's great to be back in central Florida. Thank you all for taking time out of your day to come by and let me discuss with you some important topics.

But before I do, I'm proud to be introduced by one of my favorite seniors—[laughter]—okay, my favorite mother. [Laughter] She is—I told them earlier in Pensacola, if you're trying to figure me out, like the